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A Friend with the Camberlerson

Story of a Spy in the Civil War.

By B. K. BENSON.

CHAPTER IX.
TO MINE RUN.

"We'll meet these Southern bravely hand to hand, and eye to eye, and weapon against weapon."

—Scott.

The camps were astir; the General's Aide was hurrying to and fro, amidst the bustle of an army preparing to march. I was clad in my double garments; on my lap lay the Enfield, and I was fully armed; a blanket folded lengthwise and tied into a loop was hanging at my saddle; in my haversack was the field-glass which Gen. Morell had given me in May, '61.

It was not until 6:30 that the march began. The advance was led by 100 New York cavalrymen under Capt. Schwartz, at whose left I was ordered to ride. Behind the cavalry came a long train of wagons, laden with pontoons and timbers for bridges. Down hill and up hill on the German road we went; and after us, from one hill to another, we could see marching the long infantry lines of the Second Corps—Hancock's Corps, now temporarily under command of Warren, considered by many the military genius of the Army of the Potomac.

It was after 9 o'clock when the head of the column reached the high ground overlooking the ford at Germanna. The Pioneer Corps at once set to work; a road was cut through the timber and a battery planted right and left of the road. The camps were massing our rear.

At about 11 o'clock, Gen. Meade rode up and held a short consultation with Warren; then orders came to Capt. Schwartz to cross the stream. The water came halfway up my stirrup leathers. The crossing of the cavalry was quickly made, and the foremost files galloped up the hill, which the Confederate pickets abandoned without attempting resistance. Capt. Schwartz's command now advanced in column slowly into The Wilderness. At times, on the road before us, the Confederate pickets abandoned their positions and retreated.

After advancing two miles, the Captain halted his men and sent me back for further orders. When I reached the river the pontoons were being laid, a few regiments of infantry had forded; the men of these regiments were huddled around fires, drying their clothing and bitterly complaining of the cold, and of the fact that their cartridges were wet. The artillery were crossing at the ford; the divisions of the corps were on the north bank waiting for the completion of the bridge.

I reported to Gen. Warren and asked for orders.

"Where is Capt. Schwartz now?" he asked.

"A little more than two miles in front, sir."

"How far from Flat Run?"

"About one mile, General."

"Tell him to cross Flat Run, and to advance to the road you were on. Then he must throw strong pickets on both roads and must hold the junction."

I galloped back to Capt. Schwartz, and the cavalry moved slowly forward. After crossing Flat Run our advance was very cautious until we reached the junction; there we could see small parties of the enemy's cavalry on both roads. Evidently the Confederate pickets were in doubt as to which of the roads we should take, and would not finally retire from either until they should have seen an enemy.

"What will the weather do for us to-night, Berwick?"

"I think it will be fair, Captain."

"Gen. Warren wants both roads picketed."

"Yes, sir; I think he does not wish to show his intentions to the enemy."

"You see those fellows yonder? They are lingering only for the purpose of learning what we intend. I'll keep most of my men on the main road."

I thought the Captain's plan very good, and told him so.

By daylight the infantry were in bivouac in the woods bordering Flat Run, the artillery occupying the road itself; we could see the glow of the many camp-fires in our rear, and knew that the Confederate pickets also could see it. At 9 o'clock Capt. Schwartz received sealed orders from Gen. Warren. The night passed without alarm; I slept soundly.

At daylight on the 27th the pickets on the German road were withdrawn, and the column advanced on the road to the right. I was yet with Capt. Schwartz. Nowhere on this road did we see an enemy, but at 9 o'clock, as we debouched into the Orange turnpike, a squad of cavalry was seen retiring toward the west.

My work as guide had now ended; the roads and country further to the west were unknown to me. I rode back to the head of the infantry column, and reported to Gen. Warren; he ordered me to remain near him. The column continued to march up the Orange Pike, Hayes's Division leading the infantry.

At 11 o'clock, as we were nearing Robertson's Tavern, or Locust Grove, as the Confederates called it, the column came to a dead halt, the cavalry before us sitting motionless on their horses. Capt. Schwartz reported that a line of skirmishers, infantry or dismounted cavalry, could be seen drawn across the road a quarter of a mile in front—that they had been advancing, but were now halted.

Immediately two regiments of infantry were moved forward, and when at the head of the cavalry, were deployed in a double skirmish line—then the whole corps moved on with skirmishers in front and on both flanks. In half an hour the fire of rifles broke out in the woods on our front; the column continued to move; evidently the Confederate skirmishers were being driven. A few prisoners had been captured; one of Gen. Warren's Aids questioned them, and gathered from their replies that Ewell's Corps was in our front, and moving to our right.

It had been expected by Gen. Warren that the Third Corps would by this time connect with the right; it had crossed at Jacobs's Ford with great difficulty and delay, and, for lack of a guide, had taken the wrong road; the movement reported to our right, therefore, became a source of great uneasiness, and the General ordered me to go into the woods on our right and bring him a report of the condition there.

Leaving my horse in the care of an orderly, I went forth through the woods until I struck our skirmishers. There was no enemy visible. I moved along the rear of the skirmishers toward our right. An officer stopped me and demanded my business there, but was convinced without trouble that I was on service for Gen. Warren. I found our right refused; at the

end of the line firing could be heard far to the northeast, almost in front of our flank. There had been a movement of the enemy's skirmishers to our right, and this movement had caused the formation of our flank as I now saw it, but the Confederates were already falling back; I hastily returned to the General.

Now the whole skirmish line was ordered to continue its advance. Brisk firing was heard in front, and a short movement forward was made by the column on the turnpike. Soon the firing ceased, and everything was at a halt. Some prisoners had been taken from Gordon's Brigade of Early's Division—Lawton's old Georgia Brigade.

Gen. Warren was perplexed. Ewell's Corps was doubtless in his front, and

"Start at daylight, General?"

"Yes; the corps will move behind you."

"How shall I report? How often?"

"If I don't catch your idea, Berwick."

"If I go alone, General, I can report only once, perhaps."

"Take as many men as you wish."

"Six will do, sir."

"They will report to you in half an hour. Cavalry you want?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now tell me what you propose."

"I shall keep them together, General, until I have something to report, and send them back to you one at a time as fast as I find out anything. You will meet five men bringing you information of conditions in your front."

"Good! But the sixth—and the seventh?"

"You will not see the sixth until you are in position on the left. I shall keep the last man to make an emergency report, before I find it necessary to go alone."

"A good plan, Berwick; I understand. But since the men are to return one by one, I must see to it that they are good men. I'll send them to you myself—get Col. Walker to do it. Now, look out for yourself, Berwick."

Before I slept everything had been arranged.

The General issued a successful attack at this time could not be made. He had hoped to march entirely through the Wilderness into the more open ground of Orange County before he should find his advance resisted by the enemy's infantry; this was the consideration which made him value so highly the knowledge of the road by which he was enabled to save two hours' time. The firing of cannon had been heard at our left, coming, no doubt, from the Plank road, which we knew to be some two miles to the south; but we did not then know that our cavalry under Gregg was there. It was now about 4 o'clock.

Again Gen. Warren ordered me to go to the skirmish-line and bring him word as to the situation. The skirmishers could tell me nothing except that an advance of 50 yards would find the enemy in force. I made that advance, and found no enemy, but crawling on a few yards farther I was in sight of a line of Confederates in the woods, not a line of great force—only a mere skirmish-line behind trees, the men squatting down, alert, with faces to the front. They looked as ready for a scrimmage as ever Confederates had looked; I saw from their contented attitudes that they had no disposition to retire farther, and guessed that their battle line was close to their rear.

I reported to Gen. Warren. Another advance was ordered. The wood in our front was noisy with rifles; our skirmishers did not push the enemy, and another line was ordered to their support. This help enabled the men to drive the Confederates; the sound of firing receded a little, and then everything became quiet. An officer from the front reported to Gen. Warren that the enemy's skirmishers had retired to their main lines, which could now be seen strongly entrenched in the woods. The divisions of the corps formed a line of battle, and lay on their arms throughout the night.

On the morning of the 28th rain began. The line of battle went forward and passed over the breastworks of the enemy who had abandoned the position. The advance of the skirmishers continued until they again found the enemy in force behind a crooked stream running through the woods. The rain continued to fall, and with few intervals fell all day—cold and thick. At 9 o'clock Gen. Warren in person led a reconnaissance in front of the enemy's works; the result was a number of men killed and wounded, and nothing discovered to change the view already entertained that Lee's army was before us in a position too strong to be carried.

In the afternoon Gen. Meade and Gen. Warren had a long interview.

At night Gen. Warren called for me. He said, "Berwick, I want you to get all the rest you can; you will be required to do hard work tomorrow."

"Very well, General."

"You know nothing of the country at night?"

"All that I know, General, is that the Plank road is out there somewhere, and that the country is very much like this."

"I cannot say that there are none, sir; but I judge there are no very important ones. Of course, there is that road we saw at Robertson's Tavern."

"Come here," said he, and led the way until we stood under a thick cedar. The rain kept up, and from the boughs big drops were falling; it was getting colder, and I feared that the morning would find the land covered with ice.

The General took from his pocket a piece of paper and unfolded it; it was a sketch of the country. Night was setting here tomorrow at daylight. Take this map and get into the Plank road; then follow the Plank road until you are near the enemy; then move to your left and find where their right rests; it is somewhere near the Plank road, but beyond it, perhaps."

"The bottom of the hill ran a brook, over which I easily passed. I fancied that on the next hill I should be able to hear the Confederates, if not to see them, but I went on and reached the crest, and could see or hear nothing. I waited till Ramsey could be clearly seen, and waved my hand to him to halt. Then I went back to him, and motioned to Kemp to come up, and directed the two to remain where they were until further orders."

In order to make better progress, for I knew that I should soon be compelled to crawl on my hands and knees, I now left the Enfield with Ramsey. I went up the hill again at its top I paused and considered. I was certainly on the flank of the Confederate army unless it had been thrown back here; in that case my further progress toward the west would be along its southern front. I went forward 50 yards, saw nothing, and returned to the spot I had just left; then I went 100 yards to the south and saw nothing; then I went 50 yards to the north, found nothing, and returned rapidly to Kemp and Ramsey, whom I brought up to the top of the hill.

Kemp was stationed with the three horses, and Ramsey was directed to follow me at 30 yards distance. I made my way toward the northwest, creeping half-bent sometimes, at other times standing behind a tree and listening, and at times almost crawling. I judged that I had come some yards from Kemp, and was wondering when the thing would end, when I saw more light between the branches of the trees, and I guessed that there was a variety of road before me. I knew, and soon saw what caused the greater light; it was the opening at the railroad grade; in the woods beyond all seemed as quiet as though there were no Confederates. A few birds were near the Court-House. I waited for Ramsey to come up, and ordered him to go back to Kemp and bring everything to this point.

Now I looked long and down the railroad, and then ventured across and kept on through the woods. In five minutes I came to an opening. I was on the brow of a hill; before me was a valley through which ran a road, and I saw on it some hundreds of yards was a cluster of buildings which I supposed were at the tan-yard. A few birds were near the Court-House. I waited for Ramsey to come up, and ordered him to go back to Kemp and bring everything to this point.

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